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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN TRAVEL AGENCIES EAGER TO PROMOTE TRAVEL TO THE  
UNITED STATES

1. (U) Summary: Russia's recent economic growth has brought about a dramatic rise in Russian tourist travel to foreign destinations. While traditional beach resorts in Turkey and Egypt still attract the bulk of Russian travelers, Russians are traveling to more varied destinations, including to the United States. On November 19, Moscow's Consular Section and Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) addressed misperceptions about the U.S. visa application process in a meeting with about 30 tourist agencies, responsible for over 80% of Russian travel to the United States, and 20 media outlets. The DCM and Consul General used the opportunity to introduce fingerprint re-use to the Russian media. End summary.

RUSSIANS TRAVEL, BUT NOT TO THE U.S.  
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2. (U) The Russian travel and tourism market has flourished during the past decade. According to Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) estimates, the overall number of Russian tourists traveling abroad grew 22% from 7.75 million in 2006 to 9.37 million in 2007 (Note: These data refer to travel for tourism only. In 2007, the overall number of Russian travelers for business, family and other reasons was about 30 million. End note.) Turkey, China and Egypt have held first, second and third places, respectively, as the lead destinations for Russian tourists for the past several years. FCS notes that the top three markets by growth rate in 2007 were Thailand (60% growth over 2006), Austria (44% growth) and Tunisia (39% growth).

3. (U) According to U.S. Customs and Border Control records, in CY-2007 Russian travelers to the United States on non-immigrant visas (NIVs) totaled over 114,000, up 21% from 2006. Almost half of Russia's US-bound travel (47%) was personal, 25% was for business purposes, 10% was service travel (i.e. for medical and other treatment) and 18% was for tourism only. In 2007, Russia held 42nd place in the overall number of travelers to the United States, falling far behind countries like Trinidad and Tobago, whose population is 100 times smaller than Russia's.

EMBASSY HOSTS KEY RUSSIAN TOUR AGENCIES  
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4. (U) Travel agencies have told FCS that rumors about the alleged difficulty in obtaining American tourist visas may be pushing Russians towards other destinations. The introduction of fingerprint re-use provided a natural occasion to address these misperceptions.

5. (U) On November 19, the Consular Section hosted the FCS-managed Visit USA Committee, made up of local tour operators, air carriers and travel agencies that book approximately 80% of US-bound travel. Over 30 tourist agencies and 20 media outlets attended the event called QIt's Easier than You Think.Q The event highlighted the following issues:

- Fingerprint re-use: Post recently launched the fingerprint re-use process, waiving the visa interview for many qualified applicants.

- Two year visa issuance: The standard B1/B2 visa for Russians is a one-year, multiple entry visa. Beginning last year, all Russian posts started an aggressive campaign to promote the two-year multiple entry B1/B2 visa option. For an additional USD 100, all qualifying applicants may obtain two-year multiple entry B1/B2 visas. In addition to promoting travel to the United States, two year visas ease consular workload. In the last twelve months we issued over 38,000 two-year B1/B2s as opposed to about 17,000 the year before, an increase of 123%.

- Over 95% NIV issuance rate: For the first time, from October 1, 2007, to September 30, 2008, Embassy Moscow and the three consulates in Russia processed more than 200,000 NIV applications and approved more than 95% of them.

- Power point presentation: Embassy Moscow produced a step-by-step power point presentation called QItQs Easier than You ThinkQ about the NIV application process. Embassy Moscow has posted the presentation on its website.

- Visit USA mailing list: In response to the travel agencies interest, the Consular Section created a dedicated e-mail group for inquiries from the Visit USA members. This tool is expected to further clarify and facilitate US-bound tourist travel for Russian citizens.

16. (U) Following the event, over fifteen articles and TV segments appeared presenting information about the record numbers of U.S. tourist visas for Russians, and the success rates of Russian visa applicants (over 95% get visas). The pro-Kremlin Izvestiya daily wrote that the process for obtaining a U.S. visa was Qreally very simpleQ and Qthe Embassy not only told us about it, but also showed us every step of the way in an excursion around the Consular Section.Q A number of articles quoted the director of a major Russian tourist agency saying that Qthe U.S. Consular Section is the most reliable consular section of all towards our clients.

POTENTIAL FOR MORE GOOD NEWS

17. (U) Comment: In FY 2007 Russian posts processed over 200,000 visa applications, an all time record. Although the United States has a long way to go to catch up with more popular destinations, continued outreach and a simplified application procedure due to fingerprint reuse, should contribute to further growth in Russian outbound travel to the United States. So far, the economic crisis has not had a major impact on Russian outbound tourism. However, owing to the weakening ruble, many Russians are reorienting their travel away from Europe to other destinations, including the United States. End Comment.

RUBIN